

WHAT IS THE FLU?

Questions and answers

► **The flu**

The flu is a disease of the body's breathing system, including the nose, throat and lungs. Flu is short for "influenza." The flu is caused by a virus. In the South, the yearly flu season usually begins in the winter and lasts through March. Flu that occurs every winter season is called "seasonal flu."

New and very different flu viruses that appear every 30-40 years, like the H1N1 flu virus in 2009, are called "pandemic flu." Seasonal flu and pandemic flu have similar symptoms, are spread the same way, and are prevented the same way.

► **What are the symptoms of the flu?**

The most common symptoms of the flu are fever, cough, and sore throat. Symptoms can also include body aches, headache, chills, runny nose and feeling very tired. Some people, especially young children, also have diarrhea and vomiting. Symptoms last from a few days to up to a week or more.

► **Is the flu serious?**

Yes, the flu can be very serious. Every year in the U.S. seasonal flu causes thousands of hospital admissions and deaths. Some people are at higher risk of serious health problems when they get the flu. This includes pregnant women, infants, the elderly and people with medical conditions like asthma, diabetes, heart disease, kidney disease, neurological and neuromuscular conditions and weakened immune systems.

► **How does the flu spread?**

The flu virus is in the wet spray (droplets of saliva and mucus) that comes out of the nose and mouth of someone who coughs or sneezes. If you are close enough



to a person with the flu (3 to 6 feet) when they cough or sneeze, you can breathe in the virus and get sick. Flu symptoms start one to four days (usually two days) after a person breathes in the virus. The flu is spread easily from person to person.

The virus can also live for a short time on things you touch like doorknobs, phones and toys. After you touch these objects, you can catch the virus when you touch your mouth, nose or eyes. Adults with the flu can spread it from about one day before symptoms appear to about one week after. Children can spread the flu even longer after they get sick.

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WHAT IS THE FLU?: *Questions and answers*

► How is the flu treated?

There are drugs available that your doctor may prescribe to treat the flu. The drugs work best if started soon after symptoms begin. Your doctor can determine if you need treatment. People sick with the flu should make sure to drink plenty of fluids, get plenty of rest, eat healthy foods, wash their hands often and stay home to avoid spreading the flu to other people. Over-the-counter pain relievers may help people with the flu feel more comfortable.

Children and teens with the flu should never take aspirin, because a rare but serious disease called Reye syndrome can occur. Do not give cough or cold medicines to children younger than 4 years of age.

► Is there a vaccine for the flu?

Yes. A vaccine helps your body to protect itself against a disease. This year there are two types of vaccine for flu: the shot (given with an injection, usually in the arm) and the nasal spray vaccine. Getting a flu vaccine will not give you the flu or any other type of illness. Getting the vaccine is the best way to protect yourself against the flu.

► Who should get flu vaccine?

Everyone 6 months of age and older should be vaccinated for the flu. The only exceptions are people with a severe allergy to something in the vaccine. It is especially important that people in certain high-risk groups get a flu shot every year:

- Children aged 6 months through 18 years, especially those on long-term aspirin therapy
- People 50 years of age and older
- Pregnant and postpartum women
- People of any age with certain chronic medical conditions like asthma, diabetes, heart disease, kidney disease, neurologic and neuromuscular conditions and weakened immune systems
- People with muscle and nerve disorders that make it difficult to breathe or swallow

► How do I know if I have the flu?

If you have fever with cough or sore throat, you may have the flu. If you think you have the flu, stay home from work and school and avoid contact with others so you do not spread the virus. If you think you might have flu and you need to see your doctor, call ahead and let them know you might have the flu. That way, your doctor's office can take steps to avoid the spread of flu to others. The doctor may recommend that you be tested for the flu.

► How can I prevent getting the flu?

- Get a flu vaccine every year as soon as it is available.
- Wash your hands often with soap and water, or use an

alcohol-based hand gel.

- Cough or sneeze into a tissue or into the inside of your elbow if you don't have a tissue. Throw tissues away and wash your hands. Always wash your hands before touching your eyes, nose or mouth.
- Use household cleaners to clean things that are touched often, like door knobs, toys and phones.
- Avoid close physical contact with people who are sick. Try to stay at least three to six feet from someone who is sick with the flu.
- People with young children, a weak immune system or a chronic illness should avoid crowds, if possible.
- Stay home from work and school if you get sick with a flu-like illness (fever with cough or sore throat) and avoid contact with others so the virus does not spread. Stay at home until you have been free from fever for at least 24 hours after your last dose of fever-reducing medication (like Tylenol, Advil or Motrin). For most people this will mean staying at home for about four days.

For More Information:

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► How do I take care of someone who is sick with the flu?

Flu: What You Can Do — Caring for People at Home is available online at www.cdc.gov/flu/consumer/caring-for-someone.htm. It is available in many languages and gives you information to help you care for someone who has the flu in your home.

► Where can I get more information?

- Your doctor, nurse, clinic, a community pharmacist or your local public health unit
- Louisiana Fight the Flu: ldh.la.gov/FightTheFlu.
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC): www.cdc.gov/flu
- Flu clinic information: mylocalclinic.com or HealthMap at vaccinefinder.org

This fact sheet is for information only and is not meant to be used for self-diagnosis or as a substitute for consultation with a health care provider. If you have any questions about the disease described above or think that you may have this infection, consult a health care provider.

